3: Skrine G-3 (1922-1924) 1926 All Sinkiang All

CHAPTER IV

THE MOUNTAIN ROAD TO CATHAY

THE name Tashqurghan means in Turki "stone fort", and the place is probably identical with the *λίθινος πύργος* of which Ptolemy speaks as having been the extreme western emporium of Serikē (China). At that time it was called by the Chinese Hopanto and was the capital of the frontier district of that name.[1] Now once more it is the headquarters of the Chinese Amban of Pu-li or Sariqol, who rules a long strip of country along the eastern rim of the Pamir plateau. Sariqol was made into an administrative district at the beginning of the present century, when it came into prominence from the Chinese point of view owing to the occupation of the neighbouring Pamirs by Russia. For years, indeed, the Tsar's Government kept a detachment of infantry at Tashqurghan, regardless of the fact that it was Chinese territory; the solid mud-brick fort built by them is still in good repair though it has been empty since its evacuation in 1920 by the last remnants of the former Cossack garrison of the Pamirs. Ethnically, the district is interesting as being populated in about equal proportions by two contrasting races. These are, firstly, the Tajiks, who are remarkably pure specimens of the original *Homo alpinus* stock and have inhabitated this remote corner of High Asia since the dawn of history; secondly, the Kirghiz. These latter belong to the tribe called by the Russians Kara-Kazak; they are the southernmost branch of the great Kirghiz race, and they can only live as far south as the Pamirs, the immense elevation of which makes up for the low latitude and produces a climate as rigorous as that of the Steppes.

Two entirely different routes, each about ten marches in length, connect Tashqurghan with Kashgar. The one usually followed in summer is the eastern or Chichiklik route which,

[1] Stein, "Sand-buried Ruins of Khotan," pp. 71–2.

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peaches while we watched the sunset glow fade upon rich fields of maize and peas, on cosy little farms nestling under clumps of tall bushy poplars and on warm yellow river-bluffs along the foot of which springs of pure water bubbled up among the meadows.

By mid-day on 18th July the hills on either side of us had sunk to insignificance and we came to a place where the Chinese of former days had built, *more suo*, a wall across the open valley, a wall the ends of which were quite in the air, and which could never have been defensible, even when first built. Here, at a small mediæval-looking fort called Chong (Big) Qaraul, an amiable Chinese Muhammadan *qaraulchi* or barrier officer fed us on melons and apricots on a platform under spreading planes. Before us extended a vast indefinite expanse, pale yellow and brown with wide shadows lying on it where the oases were ; nearest to us, a long line of trees some ten miles away marked Ighiz Yar, our halting-place. We thrilled to think that we were looking upon the great plain of Central Asia, the mighty belt of oasis-fringed desert which stretches for 2,000 miles from Kashgar to the mountains of Inner Mongolia.

Ighiz Yar (" The High Bluff ") proved to be a pleasant stretch of cultivated land dotted with farmsteads of mud-brick joined by leafy lanes down which ran brooks of clear water. Except that the soil was obviously far more fertile—the loess of Kashgaria is as a matter of fact one of the most fertile soils in the world—it might have been a Persian village. Our lodging proved to be a small house near the lower end of the oasis, consisting of one very large room with a raised floor and a large square skylight, and a small windowless room opening out of it. There was a third chamber, but this was not available as the entire family moved into it when we took possession ; as their ingress and egress was through the big room, the privacy of the latter left something to be desired. Our two rooms opened on to a courtyard in which (as the house boasted no garden) our retinue took up their quarters ; they also opened on a cow-byre.

Harding caught us up at Ighiz Yar, and next day all four of us went on together to Yangi Hissar. The (Hindu) British Aqsaqal of the place, a wealthy Shikarpuri banker called Ratan Chand, sent a smart buggy to meet us half-way, and in this D. and I, drawn by the fieriest of Ferghana stallions, performed the rest of the march in what must surely have

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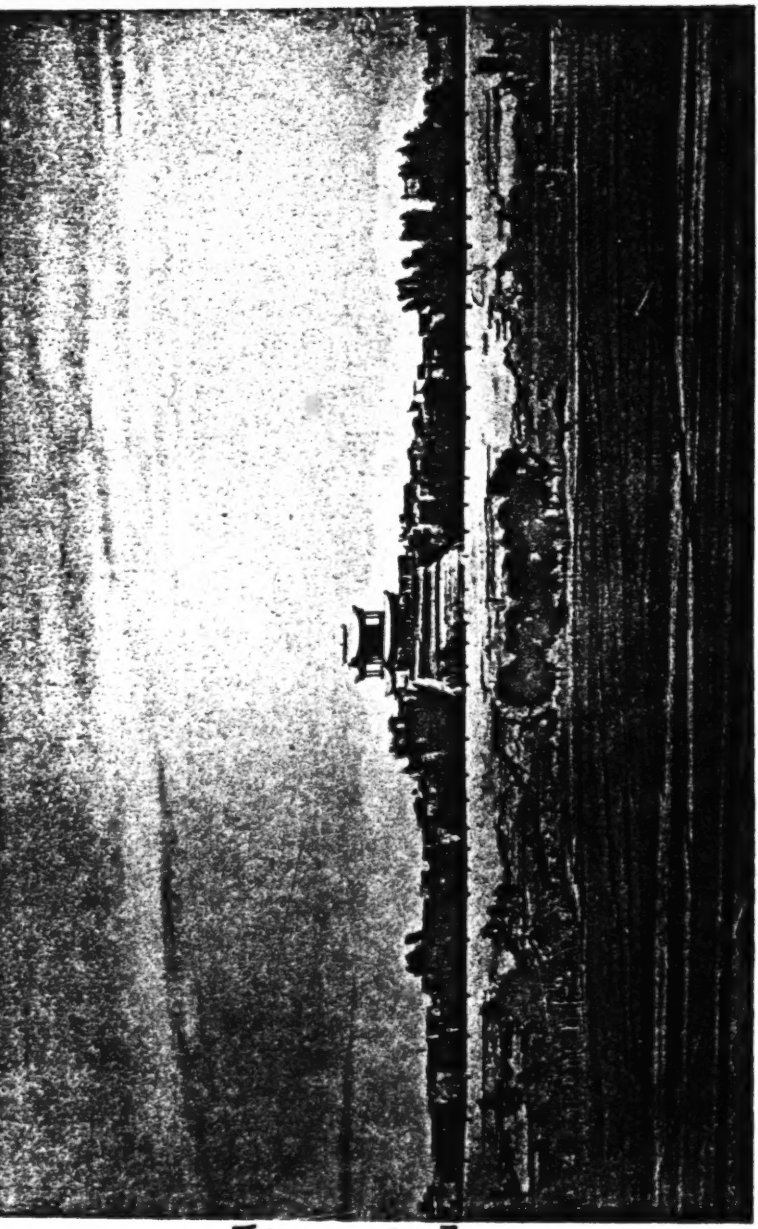

THE WALLS OF OLD KASHGAR

[Face p. 54]

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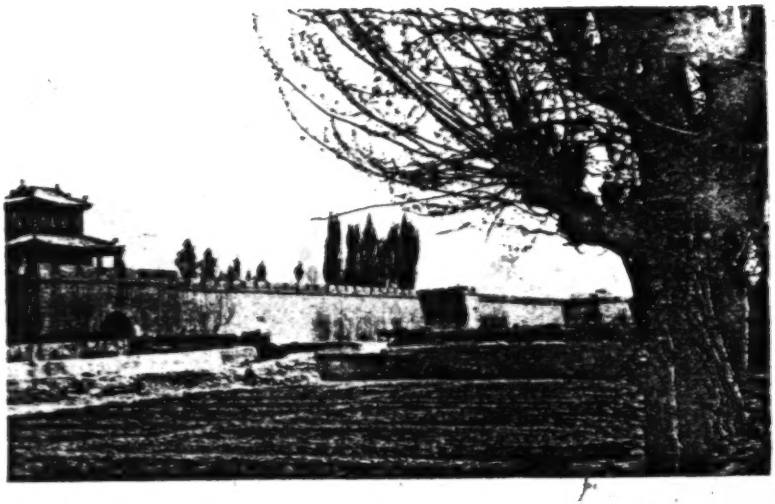

THE WALLS OF KHOTAN

A STORY-TELLER AND HIS AUDIENCE, KARGHALIK

[Face p. 304]

3:Cable & French M-5 (1926) 1927 AF13 Northwest China
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mud floor was transformed into a series of mud pits so treacherously slippery that we had to move about with the greatest care. During a fine spell between two storms the Commanding Officer appeared at our door to return our call. We were not sorry that he should see our plight, but his only comment was: 'This is a small place, and the inns are poor. I suppose that in England your hotels are all better than this?'

Though we suffered so much discomfort from the rain, we were secretly rejoicing, because news was brought to us that a number of young men had escaped that night, and thanks to the rain had not yet been recaptured. Hsinghsinghsia has the only spring of water in an immense area, and the patrols found it sufficient to watch the next springs on either side in order to take deserters. As the hunted man crept stealthily to the water's edge to slake his thirst under cover of darkness, the mounted soldiers seized him, bound him and drove him back to the camp, where many had died from the severity of the flogging received. After the rains, however, little pools of water collected in the hollows of the granite rocks, and thus enabled the fugitives to leave the main road and so reach freedom. Many deaths had occurred through pedestrians, or mounted travellers, trying to cross the frontier without passing the camp. One day six riderless mules were captured, the men having, doubtless, died of thirst in the sands.

It was very touching to see the delight with which groups of these poor men would gather around us and talk for long hours. We had travelled so much in North China that we knew the localities from which several of them had come. Some from Shansi found that we actually knew the very villages where their parents lived, and in some cases we had even visited the homes of relatives. One youth was the son of the

3:Cable & French M-5 (1926) 1927 AF13 Northwest China
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this oasis on his son, Chagatai, and Hami has never ceased to be ruled by a succession of Khans, who at the present day are wise enough to recognise the suzerainty of China, and thus avoid the friction which would be caused by any rebellious policy. At a little distance stood another walled city which contained the Chinese Yamen barracks and garrison, and where a good portion of the Chinese population reside. Outside, between and around these two enclosures, were the busy streets and covered bazaars, forming a business quarter for both Chinese and Turki. Some splendid parks, through which ran a wide canal, flanked the Huei Huei [1] city. Every available acre of land adjacent to the town was used for intensive market-gardening, and beyond this, to the very edge of the oasis (which stretched seven miles to north and south, and five miles to east and west), the land was brought under cultivation by Turki farmers.

As usual, we took the first opportunity of calling on the wives of our landlord. They occupied certain inner courtyards, well furnished and decorated with flowers both cut and growing. The harem contained the regulation number of four wives, and a goodly company of children, as well as a widowed relative and her daughter.

The girls wore gay dresses made in one piece, slit at the neck by a hole, through which the head passed, and which was then tied in on either shoulder. Even the smallest girls wore their dresses to the ankle. A veil, usually of white muslin, but in some cases made of coloured silk, covered the head and fell to the knees. It concealed the hands, and when in mixed company was held up and adroitly manipulated, so as to be drawn across the face or withdrawn at will. The women's

[1] Huei Huei, the Chinese word for Moslem.

3: Cable & French M-5 (1926) 1927 AP13 Northwest China
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This town is known to Russians as Chuguchak, to Chinese as Tacheng, but colloquially it is always called Behya—'The Town of Seagulls'—because these birds, following the course of the Irtish River all the way from Arctic regions, collect here at certain seasons of the year. We had in fact already seen them in the Gobi further south, but could scarcely credit them to be really seagulls until we learnt that it is their habit to follow the great rivers as far as their sources. Geographically and politically the position of Tacheng is an important one, forming as it does the one outlet towards Siberia for all Turkestan. It is a populous, busy city, with important Chinese and Russian quarters. There is a Russian Consul in residence, part of whose duties consists in the issuing of temporary passports to drivers and carters passing to and fro over the border. There are postal and telegraph offices and a military station. The postmaster, Mr. Chang, was very helpful and friendly. He knew something of foreigners' tastes, being a Hankow man, and suggested that 'the ladies might enjoy a drive round the city,' and he therefore sent his Russian carriage and driver to show us the sights. Having completed the *Grand Tour* this man then asked us if we would like to see some more. 'Certainly,' we said, 'show us all there is worth seeing,' whereupon, with a grin, he whipped up his horse, and starting off at a good pace took us exactly over the same ground as before! The smart carriage, with strangers seated in it, attracted some attention on its first round, but when we appeared the second time the shopkeepers themselves came to their doors, exclaiming, 'Here they come again!' while one, making a movement with his hand, indicated that we were on a perpetual circular tour. To 'save face' we therefore drew up before some of the shops, and enquired the price of many of the goods, though we had not the slightest intention